Agrarian reforms are being updated in Latin America, both in socio-political thought and practice. Their promotion, of which the Agrarian Reform World Forum is an important proponent, is rooted in a reality that has proven resilient to poverty reduction and has pushed more than 20 million people to the brink of hunger, all in a context of a world food crisis that has yet to find an exit strategy. At the same time, recent agrarian reforms are being deepened and extended by progressive governments with a view to addressing legitimate popular demands. Land redistribution has been boosting peasant production and revitalizing an entire way of life based upon rural production that has been severely affected by neoliberalism. For all of these reasons, we need to trace the trajectory of the peasant economy with a view to assessing its real potential as a solution to the problems of food production and a threatened way of life being experienced by such large numbers of people.

The small plot producer is one the most salient forms of activity that the surplus population adopts in the countryside. It is a result of underdevelopment and industrial colonialism that responds partially and provisionally to the needs of capital expansion. It is expected to fulfill economic functions in terms of supplying cheap means of production and consumption that it can only do, as we shall argue, under certain conditions. On the other hand, the real reason behind its persistence as a space for surplus population lies in the political sphere. The quest for social peace and control over social discontent is the main drive for government enhancement of peasant production during certain historical periods.

Plot production is one of the important means by which sectors of the surplus population make their living, doing so through alternative forms of labor organization. Some segments of these producers maintain links with capital accumulation and evolve as relative surplus population while others form part of the absolute surplus population since they attain no role in the benefit of accumulation. Accumulation under industrial colonialism first produces them as overpopulation. Capital then promotes their organization as subsidiary producers only to have their expectations later shattered at a certain point of accumulation. That is to
say, their existence is subject to dramatic shifts from one pole of the surplus population to another, a social transmutation that moves them from being subsidiary producers to being independent producers whose maintenance must ultimately be supplemented by other family members. Amidst an environment that harries them, they are forced to struggle in order to get from politics that which the economy denies them.

In this chapter, we intend to develop further these propositions. First, we will discuss the social character of peasant production from the point of view of its internal organization. Our points of reference consist of the producer’s relation to the means of production and the aim of production. Next, we will explore the relations of plot production to capital accumulation, paving the way for an analysis of the dialectics of plot production. Finally, we will turn to the social transmutation that such dialectics imply. To deal with all of these issues, we will build a logical construct that emphasizes the way that peasant production tends to evolve independently from the form of economic growth and in isolation from heterogeneous peasant spaces. To close this chapter, however, we will attempt to assess the overall impact of neoliberalism on peasant production. Our approach remains squarely within the confines of political economy and no attempt will be made to encroach upon anthropological terrain.

_The Social Character of Peasant Production_

Following Engels, we can say that in principle, “By small peasant we mean here the owners or tenant—particularly the former—of a patch of land no bigger, as a rule, than he and his family can till, and no smaller than can sustain the family” (Marx & Engels, 1955 [1894]: 658).¹ No attention will be paid to Engels’ suggestion that there could be medium and large-scale peasants, and it will be assumed that, alongside the peasant and other forms of the surplus population, there are only small, medium and large-scale capitalists who accumulate thanks to the exploitation of wage-labor. Thus, the peasant is a small producer who: a) cultivates a plot that suffices for his and his family’s sustenance; and b) as a general rule, uses his own labor power and that of his family, but who can resort to other labor power when the family effort does not suffice.